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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000003

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TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PROP](#) [PTER](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: BASRAH'S IRAQ SECURITY FORCES QUELL "SOLDIERS OF HEAVEN"  
UPRISING

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CLASSIFIED BY: Hal Howard, A/Director, Regional Embassy Office -  
Basrah, Department of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (d)

¶1. (C//Rel ACGU) Summary & Comment: The Shia festival of Ashura was disrupted January 18 when militants from the messianic cult Jund al Sama'a (Soldiers of Heaven - JAS) attacked Iraqi police and civilians in Basrah. It is believed the cult sought to create the chaos that foretells the return of the Shia 12th Immam who will bring peace to the world and to exact revenge on Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) for a December 4 raid. ISF performed above expectations quelling most of the violence within hours; sporadic fighting continued until the morning of January 19. Casualty estimates vary widely. MND-SE supported the ISF with aerial surveillance and a "show of force" over Basrah, but were not asked by the ISF to provide ground support. GOI interlocutors, concerned over being criticized for not eliminating the Soldiers of Heaven after clashes last year, are claiming other groups were responsible. A GOI investigation and detainee debriefings are ongoing. End Summary.

¶2. (C//Rel ACGU) Violence erupted January 18 in downtown Basrah when members of Jund al Sama'a (Soldiers of Heaven - JAS) initiated simultaneous attacks in Basrah and Nasiriyah. At 1330 (GMT +3), militants armed with small to heavy weapons attacked Iraqi Police (IP) checkpoints, Ashura religious parades, the Southern Oil Company, and mortared the Basrah Operations Center (BOC). Militia snipers were also seen on rooftops. Fighting began in the Jubayla neighborhood spreading to Jumhuriyah and Jananiyah. Within minutes, IP Chief and acting BOC commander MG Jalil Khalaf Shueil requested CF aviation to perform a "show of force" over the city. MND-SE surveillance assets observed thousands of civilians running through the streets. Four F-18s were then stationed over the city, which proved effective in breaking up some of the crowds. MND-SE also prepared a Quick Reaction Force to enter the city, but Jalil claimed the ISF had the situation under control.

¶3. (C//Rel ACGU) Jalil did, however, request 14th DIV (IA) support, which was not immediately forthcoming. The 14th DIV commander refused to recognize Jalil as the BOC commander - with responsibility over all ISF in the province - in the absence of LTG Mohan Hafith Fahad. MND-SE pressure and a call from Mohan in London settled the matter. Eventually, IA armor and dismounted units engaged militants in support of the police. The fighting climaxed at the JAS compound (vic GR 69048063),

which was taken by the ISF around 1830. Sporadic fighting continued until the morning of January 19. As a precaution, IA units remained in the city at intersections and bridges.

¶4. (C//Rel ACGU) Casualty figures vary, but according to Jalil the ISF suffered 6 killed and 19 wounded, while approximately 35 militants were killed, 40 wounded and 120 arrested. The local press reported 66-110 deaths and 217 wounded. Jalil told us that the JAS militia leader in Basrah, Abu Mustafa Alsari, was killed in the fighting. Jalil also said senior Iraqi intelligence officers arrived January 20 to conduct an investigation and debrief detainees.

¶5. (C//Rel ACGU) According to Jalil, local politicians contacted him and offered their militias in support, including Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), Iraqi Hizbollah, Lord of the Martyrs and Fadhila. Jalil refused reminding them that they carried illegal arms and their presence on the streets would only confuse the situation further. Observers noted, however, a JAM presence on the streets after the fighting subdued to maintain order. Jalil also told us that calls from Basrawis notifying the IP of militant locations were extremely useful.

¶6. (C//Rel ACGU) Unlike the JAM uprising on October 23, 2007, Jalil and Governor Mohammed Wa'eli were quick to hold press conferences to prevent speculative reporting and reassure the public. Iraqi media reported, however, that CF aircraft bombed Basrah, but it is more likely high explosive rounds fired by IA tanks during an engagement were heard instead. MND-SE Media Ops repudiated the report, which was subsequently retracted.

¶7. (C//Rel ACGU) Various groups have been blamed for the attacks, but in Basrah, The Soldiers of Heaven were most likely responsible. Some reports have blamed Jaysh Al-Sarkhi (a group often confused with JAS due to similar ideologies) but indications are that if Jaysh al-Sarkhi participated, it was in Nasiriyah and not Basrah. An Office of the Martyr Sadr spokesman in Najaf denied JAM involvement. Sources tell us that

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the Soldiers of Heaven also go by the name of Ansar al Mahdi (Mahdi Supporters), adding to the confusion. Jalil told us that JAS received weapons and training from Iran.

¶8. (U) JAS is a small Shia cult seeking to foment chaos to bring the return of the 12th Imam or Mahdi, who disappeared in the 9th Century but will, according to some Shia Muslims, return to save the world. Observers of the attacks saw militants wearing yellow headbands with a Star of David - the color and symbol of the group. Their spiritual leader is Ahmad Hassan al-Basri (aka al-Yemani). Iraqi sources tell us his current whereabouts are unknown, but he is often sighted in Nasiriyah and Najaf where the group's core membership is located. They are estimated to have around 200-400 followers in Basrah.

¶9. (C//Rel ACGU) It is likely that the GOI, embarrassed by their failure to prevent JAS from attacking the Ashura festival a second time, is claiming that other groups were to blame. Several GOI sources have told us that JAS were not responsible, but other sources overwhelmingly attribute the attacks to them. During a similar uprising at last year's Ashura festival, the ISF claimed to have killed 263 JAS members, including their former military leader, Diyah Abdul Zahra Kazim al-Gharari. Jalil told us that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's office ordered secret raids by Baghdad-based ISF to pre-empt attacks at this year's festival and in reprisal for al-Basri's late December criticisms of Shia leaders. Jalil said he and Mohan were made aware of the January 4 raid against the group's Husseiniyah (religious school), though Mohan denied knowledge of the raid in the local press. Alsari reportedly ordered attackers to target the ISF on January 18 in reprisal for the GOI's raid.

¶10. (C//Rel ACGU) COMMENT: Despite the IP's poor performance against JAM on October 23, they appear to have performed above expectations against JAS. Their performance may be attributable

to Jalil's reform efforts over the last couple of months and give the IP a much needed confidence boost. Questions remain, however, as to how they would respond against JAM - a stronger foe that has thoroughly infiltrated the police. The event also highlights how quickly Basrah's stability can be disrupted and the need for increased coordination between the Iraqi Army and Police. It is unlikely JAS will cause further problems in the near-term, given their propensity for attacking during Ashura and the ISF's current crackdown on them. End Comment.

HOWARD